Discovery of the Hansen Cave of the Timpanogos National Monument

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During the late 1800's, as civilization spread through the western states, heavy demands were imposed on the forests of the region. As the readily available lumber supplies were exhausted, the timber cutters gradually invaded the more difficult to reach spots. In the canyon of the American Fork River this meant going higher and higher up the steep slopes.

In the year 1887, sometime during the fall, Lehi resident, Martin Hansen was cutting timber high upon the south wall of the canyon. One day, when it was time to return to his home, he left his ax by the partially trimmed tree on which he had been working. That night a light snow fell and powdered the countryside. Returning to work the next morning, Mr. Hansen noticed the tracks of a mountain lion in the snow near the fallen tree. Armed with only his ax, he followed the spoor onto some higher ledges; there, they led him into an opening in the cliff face. Going a short way into the opening, Mr. Hansen suddenly realized that should he corner the lion, his only weapon was the ax. Turning back towards the entrance he observed that the floor was littered with bones and other debris. Resuming work Mr. Hansen made a mental note of the location of the cave with the object of exploring it further at the first opportunity.

During the following winter, Martin Hansen interested several other men in his discovery and they joined together to open the cave to the public. With the aid of his brother-in-law, Richard Steele, and Charles and

Joseph Burgess, the discoverer hacked out a rough trail from the canyon bottom to the cave entrance. The path went almost straight up for 1,200 feet with little or no attention given to such refinements as switchbacks to reduce the grade. In places where it was necessary to climb, trees were felled against the higher ledges and a crude ladder formed by trimming the branches. At other difficult places along the trail, logs were bolted to the steep rock faces to offer better footing. Hansen apparently had no legal claim to the cave, but in order to protect it he placed a wooden door over the natural entrance.

For about three or four years after the discovery, Hansen conducted group tours through the cave on request; a small fee being collected for this guide service. Many of the people on these tours would remove souvenirs from the cave, and despite the locked door, others would occasionally break into the cave to destroy and remove dripstone formations. Sometime during 1891, Hansen stopped taking groups through the cave and did not return for a year or two. Reportedly, unknown to Mr. Hansen, during the winter of 1892–93, a few men from neighboring town mined the cave for the “onyx” deposits. These men had located the cave as a mining claim and working on contract with the Duke-Onyx Company of Chicago, Illinois, stripped the cave of its decorations and of course, destroyed its scenic value. The scattered remnants of the formations that may still be seen in the various rooms of Hansen’s Cave indicate that originally it was exceptionally well decorated. Remaining deposits show predominance of various shades of red, deep browns, yellow, cream and some unstained white calcite. Aside from the usual dripstone and flowstone deposits, patches of anthodites and helictites may still be seen. Of the material removed, no records have been uncovered to reveal its disposition, but it is known that at least two freight cars were loaded from this place. It has been

said that some of the slabs weighed as much as fifteen tons. About the only indication of what happened to most of the “onyx” is that it was shipped to an eastern city. One rumor has it that some may have been used for decorative purposes in the construction of the American Museum of Natural History, in New York City. It is known that one of the main wings of the museum was erected during the decade 1890–1900, but no record was kept of the source of building material. Another building in which some of the flowstone may have been used is the Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City. A mantel on the third floor of the temple, reportedly, consists of polished slabs of “onyx” taken from the cave, and fashioned by John Devey, a former resident of Lehi, Utah. A granddaughter of Devey, living in Provo, Utah, has in her possession a small table which was made by him. The table consists of polished columns and discs, arranged in steps and made of calcite that supposedly was taken from Hansen’s Cave.

Though the story of Martin Hansen following the lion into the cave is the most widespread, it is not fully accepted by some of his surviving children. As they recall his telling them, he had found the cave while cutting timber, but not by following lion tracks to it. “While chopping trees on the mountainside, he heard an echoing sound which made him think the ground beneath him was hollow. In trying to locate the cause for the echo he found the present Hansen’s Cave. A few years later, again while cutting timber, he came across the lion tracks which he followed to a natural opening in the rocks; but after this initial discovery he could not relocate the entrance to this second cave.” It has been implied that this last found cave is the one presently known as Timpanogos.

Present day visitors to the area see only the first room of the Hansen’s Cave. It was from this room that a tunnel was drilled to Middle

Cave. Overall, it is a linear northeast trending series of three large rooms connected by smaller rooms or passageways with a few short side passages. Total length is about 300 feet. The first room entered is used as an orientation chamber for the cave tours and no visitor is allowed into the other sections as a protective measure for the cave’s water supply which is located there.